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BUSINESS: Wal-Mart seeks less toxic chemicals for its products

Michael Burnham, *Greenwire* reporter

The world's largest retailer says it will identify environmentally preferable characteristics of chemicals the company wants in the products it sells and plans to encourage suppliers to replace chemicals that don't pass muster.

In its "Preferred Chemicals Principles," Wal-Mart singled out yesterday three chemicals it seeks to find substitutes for. The chemicals include propoxur and permethrin -- both of which are common in household insecticides -- as well as nonyl phenol ethoxylates (NPE), an ingredient in cleaning products, paints, resins and insecticides.

"This set of principles will help move us toward more sustainable products for mother, child and environment," said John Westling, senior vice president and general merchandise manager for Wal-Mart's merchandise division.

The Bentonville, Ark., company plans to expand its effort to 17 additional chemicals during the next two years, Westling noted.

"We anticipate that our efforts will encourage our suppliers and their suppliers to innovate new product formulations that will be better for our customers and the environment," Westling added. Under the new set of principles, Wal-Mart plans to ask its suppliers to identify which of their products contain any of the three chemicals identified. Next, Wal-Mart plans to develop a plan of action to deal with the use of those chemicals. Under a final "recognition and reward" phase, the company says it will acknowledge suppliers who participate in the effort.

Wal-Mart officials said in a statement that "the company's preference is to move to alternative chemicals that meet the Wal-Mart Preferred Chemicals Principles." However, company officials did not respond to *Greenwire* questions whether the retailer would not do business with suppliers that fail to find adequate replacements for the targeted chemicals.

Propoxur and permethrin, which are toxic to humans, can cause dizziness, labored breathing, nausea or vomiting if ingested, according to the Pesticide Action Network, a San Francisco-based organization that works to replace pesticide use with environmentally preferable alternatives. In severe cases, permethrin can induce muscle twitching and fluid in the lungs.